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OVID AND THE PRICE OF BOOKS

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*Bibliopolae* notoriously made such money out of selling books (cf. Martial XIV 194 and *RE* s.v. *Buchhandel*, 984-985, “Bucherpreis”) This fact enables us to understand a witty epigram by Ovid, which is the Preface to his *Amores*:

*Qui modo Nasonis fueramus quinque libelli,  
tres sumus: hoc illi praetulit auctor opus.  
Vt iam nulla tibi nos sit legisse voluptas,  
at levior demptis poena duobus erit.*

The first edition of Ovid’s work contained enough poems to fill 5 books; when writing the second edition he eliminated enough verse as would have occupied 2 books, so that the reduced edition consisted in 3 books instead of the original 5.

All this can be easily deduced from lines 1-2. However, lines 3-4 have not been correctly understood so far, as I shall now indicate. The traditional interpretation of the epigram is exemplified by G. Showerman’s rendering (in his Loeb edition):

“We who erewhile were five booklets of Naso now are three: the poet has preferred to have his work thus rather than as before. Though even now you may take no joy of reading us, yet with two books taken away pains will be lighter.”

The problem presented by the traditional interpretation is easy to see: why should Ovid say that the readers now (*iam*) may derive no pleasure from perusing his 3 books? Surely the readers had bought his *libelli* because they enjoyed reading what he wrote.

The solution to the problem is not difficult to find. Here, *qui* means “as much as”, and denotes the price to be paid, *i.e.* is equivalent to *quanti*<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Lewis-Short, s.v. 2 *qui*, II B (*qui datur, qui sis, quique liceant veneant*. Pl. *Men.* 549, etc.); Forcellini, s.v. *qui* A2, p. 1013, (= *quanti*).

This use of *qui* refers to humans (slaves) being sold and bought: Ovid's books are here personified because they speak, and are metaphorically envisaged as his servants.

The sense is therefore: "We, erewhile 5 books of Naso, cost then (*fuera*) as much as (*qui*) we, now 3, cost (*sumus*)".

The price of each book has, in other words, now (*iam*) increased. The *libelli* therefore add: "although (*ut*) you may take no pleasure from reading us now (*iam*: insofar as our price has now increased), nevertheless (*at*) your financial suffering (*poena* means probably *poena pecuniaria*: cf. Forcellini, s. v. *pecuniarius*) –i.e. the pain caused by the higher price you paid now for each book- will be lighter with two books taken away: that is to say, if you had had to buy 5 books instead of 3 at the higher price now fixed for each single book, you would have incurred a greater expense".